

## OPTIMUM PIG FLOWS

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Producing the optimum number of pigs from your unit is essential in order to maximize profits and produce as efficiently as possible.

It is well proven that there are many aspects of pig flow that influence the performance of your barn:

- Increasing weaning age cuts feed cost to market.
- Overcrowding causes drops in growth rate and increase in vices.
- Under capacity results in empty space which is expensive.
- Feeding the wrong rations might slow pigs down and cause constipation in the barn.
- Deterioration in health or acute health challenges can result in lower growth rate or, in some cases, empty space from high mortality.

The whole production system should be geared to producing the “right” number of pigs.

Producers need to clearly understand the economics of different alternatives when deciding what number of pigs is “right” for their barn.

There is a good case for producing the maximum number of pigs out of the sow unit, as most costs are fixed on the weaned pigs. However cutting the age at weaning might result in a less profitable system due to higher feed costs to get the pigs to market. This is especially true when pig markets are low and feed prices are high as they are at the present time. Most nutritionists are now advocating a weaning age of at least 20 days.

There is nearly always a slow down in growth rate in the summer time. Loss of appetite due to heat causes pigs to get backed up and barns can become constipated. This often results in producers having to sell lighter slaughters at a time when the price is traditionally at its peak.

This can be avoided by selling feeder pigs in the late winter and early spring when the market for isoweans and feeder pigs peaks. That way you can create extra space in the system to spread pigs out for the summer months and prevent excessive congestion in the barns.

Alternatively if extra contract space is available, producers can take on extra space in the late spring in anticipation of the congestion and avoid selling pigs lighter than desired.

By the same token, there is often a lack of pigs in many systems in winter when the productivity in the sow units drops due to summer infertility and heat stress on boars. It is essential to monitor this over several years so that producers know how many extra sows need to be bred in order to avoid fluctuations in pig flow.

Maintaining good health in the barns is also essential. Disease breaks inevitably cause a slow down in growth and increase in mortality. If there is no associated mortality, but the pigs just get sick, then barn constipation occurs. By contrast, excessive mortality, as in the case of Circovirus can leave expensive space empty.

I suspect that health, or rather the lack of healthy pigs, is the most underrated cost in many systems. We estimate that PRRS alone in the finishers, even with the absence of other diseases costs producers about \$4.50 per pig. This is from our assessment of about 350,000 pigs through our finishers in the US.

Maintaining strict biosecurity protocols in both the sow barns and grower units is essential.

Monitoring gilt source and semen source is your veterinarian's responsibility.

Make sure you maintain biosecurity in the grower units so as to avoid unnecessary and costly health breaks.

In addition, managing sick pens is essential. It is always the strongest and healthiest pens that do not get sorted down causing overcrowding and drops in growth rate for the best pigs.

Why do we give the least healthy pigs the most room? Producers need to make decisions very early on whether to cull or destroy sick pigs in order to use space efficiently. It is very seldom cost effective to sell cull pigs versus destroying them. Transport costs alone can be more than producers receive for the pigs. Better to bite the bullet and use the space for healthy pigs.

There is certainly merit in simply putting pigs in pens according to how they arrive instead of sorting by size. Pecking order is established quickly and as the fastest growing pigs reach market weight, they leave behind extra space for the other pigs to grow on.

In conclusion, it is essential to know what the opportunity cost of taking one course of action is over another. Running a production system is not just about producing the most pigs possible. It is more about producing pigs as efficiently as possible.